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**THE SOVIET WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN: LESSONS TO FRAME
SUCCESS AND AVOID FAILURES**

By Mr. Lester W. Grau and Mr. Thomas P. Wilhelm

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“Asia is not going to be civilized after the methods of the West. There is too much Asia and she is too old. You cannot reform a lady of many lovers, and Asia has been insatiable in her flirtations aforetime. She will never attend Sunday school, or learn to vote save with swords for tickets.” Rudyard Kipling, “The Man Who Was”

A current hypothesis supporting the ISAF reduction and withdrawal in 2014 is posited as follows: *The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has already won the conflict in Afghanistan. While the Government is nascent, as long as ISAF continues to support it, it should be more than a match for the various insurgent adversaries it faces. This hypothesis hinges on the inability of the Taliban to form a coherent insurgent group (keep their local combatants and unify the various groups), the continued support of the US and NATO (monetary and trainers, not combat formations), and the ability of the Afghan government to wisely use that support to maintain both some semblance of security and legitimacy.*

Response: Studying the Soviet Model:

While the gamut of complex issues that affect present-day Afghanistan’s stability are too many to deal with here, a study of the Soviet and post-Soviet history of security and conflict in Afghanistan is useful in terms of deriving some lessons learned from that superpower’s experience that could guide US and western leaders today regarding framing successes and avoiding failures in the withdrawal.

The Soviets Come:

The Soviet incursion into Afghanistan was designed to overthrow the head of state to reestablish a friendly government, protect Afghanistan’s borders from conventional force invasions from Pakistan and Iran, garrison the cities and airfields, protect the lines of communication with the Soviet Union and free the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan to deal with guerrillas. The Soviets planned to be there for two years and then withdraw the bulk of their force. Instead, they were there for over nine years, they increased their presence from three divisions to five and two-third division equivalents and led the counter-insurgency effort against the Mujahideen. Their presence ignited a civil war primarily between the cities and rural population.

General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 and his first instinct was to win the war in Afghanistan militarily that year. Aerial bombardment and aggressive ground assaults increased and there are indications that the Soviets nearly succeeded in breaking the back of the resistance. Guerrilla groups refused to leave Pakistan for the killing ground of Afghanistan and were mostly ineffective when they did. However, it was the deteriorating

domestic situation in the Soviet Union that drove Gorbachev's decision to ultimately limit resources to Afghanistan. At this time, many of his military advisers counseled withdrawing.

In 1986, Gorbachev announced the "Afghanization" of the fight and prepared for the withdrawal of the 40th Army. It would take three years.¹ The Soviet reason for its incursion had been to reestablish a secure, friendly government on its southern border: they accomplished this. The strategic objectives of their exit strategy were to maintain influence in Afghanistan with a low profile that would not invite Mujahedin or insurgent attacks against them and to create an environment that facilitated a defensible border between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan. While the Soviets did continue economic and social programs, they did so in a much reduced manner and did not engage in the previous nation- and institution-building scopes of work. At the same time, the Soviet strategic objectives did not include addressing Afghanistan's enduring security issues related to the Afghanistan-Pakistan borders and the lack of Pakistani control over its tribal areas. Some of the most critical issues included the intractable Durand Line disagreement, the issue of millions of refugees, the continued existence of hostile groups operating in Pakistan's tribal areas, and the escalating power of regional commanders in Afghanistan.

The Soviets left key military, intelligence, and security advisor missions in place after the withdrawal. They proved invaluable in keeping the supplies delivered and building effective information networks, especially in the north where their concern was about the border. They also assisted in critical strategic operations such as the breaking the siege of Jalalabad. The selective nature of their security assistance approach ensured that they did not create visible mission profiles.

During the occupation, Soviets had devoted a lot of energy trying to create a Soviet-model Afghan Army, when Afghanistan required an army more appropriate to Afghan culture, society, history and geography. However, Soviet training was most effective when it came to teaching skills that did not rely on a transformational model—driving a vehicle, laying artillery, launching rockets, maintaining engines and so on. The overall Soviet model remained, but it began to change into a more Afghan-appropriate model.

Initially following the Soviet withdrawal, the Afghan Army did not do well. Desertions, which had plagued the army throughout the war, rose dramatically. Officers and soldiers took their weapons, deserted and joined the Mujahideen or went home. The 5th and 7th Border Guards Brigades systematically transferred and sold weapons to the Mujahideen. The week before the final Soviet forces left Afghanistan, two Afghan helicopter crews flew from Bagram to the Panjsher Valley and deserted to Ahmed Shah Masood (these helicopters were destroyed by air on 11 February 1989). Post # 43 south of Salang had 144 personnel surrender after receiving the first incoming shot. The 60th Infantry Division on the Jalalabad road was unreliable.² The

¹ For a discussion of the planning and conduct of the withdrawal, see Lester W. Grau, "Breaking Contact Without Leaving Chaos: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, April-June 2007.

² Makhmut A. Gareev, *Moya poslednyaya vojna [My last war]*, Moscow: Insan, 1996, 101.

Mujahideen succeeded in cutting the fuel pipeline in the eastern corridor and now it stopped at Puli-Khumri.³ The saving grace for the Afghan government was that the Mujahideen ranks also dwindled dramatically. The Soviets were gone. Their reason for fighting was gone. Most of the insurgents could not care less about who was in charge in Kabul, so they went home. And once they got home, many of them joined the government tribal militia force and were paid to guard the lines of communication from the Soviet Union to the cities.

The first big test occurred when the Mujahideen attempted to capture a city by siege so that they declare the capital of “Free Afghanistan”. Konduz, Kabul, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Khost were primary targets. Konduz fell briefly during the Soviet withdrawal and was retaken by Afghan government forces. The provincial capital of Taloqan eventually fell to the Mujahideen, but this could hardly count as a major city.

The Siege of Jalalabad

The siege of Jalalabad was the first major battle following the Soviet withdrawal. It started out badly. In April 1989, the 11th Infantry Division was guarding the eastern approach when the Mujahideen seized the commanding terrain and then attacked to capture the airfield. The division disintegrated. A regiment surrendered practically without firing a shot. General Baragzai, the 1st Army Corps Commander was killed in action. Many soldiers of the division surrendered. Only 35 members of the division staff, including its commander, evaded capture. The Jalalabad garrison reacted and was able to stop the attack and save the airfield. General Asef Delawar, the Chief of the General Staff, flew in to take command. The famous 15th Tank Brigade, with no more than 30 tanks, set out from Kabul to reinforce the garrison. They were joined by the tough 37th Commando Brigade (actually no more than 400 soldiers). The siege of Jalalabad continued for two months. During this time, the maintenance depots in Kabul were able to repair 70 tanks and personnel carriers and over 100 artillery pieces. These were used to outfit a new tank brigade and an artillery and artillery regiment. These were sent to Jalalabad along with units from Mazar-i Sharif, Herat, and other locales. The Afghan air force was flying 120 sorties a day in support.⁴ Government forces were 8,000 soldiers, 31 tanks (of which 23 were running), 20 personnel carriers, and 86 artillery pieces and mortars.⁵

The Mujahideen also reinforced the siege. A number of foreign jihadists joined the effort to seize the gateway to Afghanistan. Their estimated strength was 12,000-15,000 men, 200 rocket launchers, 280 artillery pieces and mortars and 20 armored vehicles. The Soviets believe that artillery units from Pakistan’s 11th and 18th Infantry Divisions were also present and fired at night. The Soviets believe that the Mujahideen were going to launch a major offensive at the end of Ramadan.⁶

³ Gareev, 100.

⁴ Gareev, 237-244.

⁵ Gareev, 245.

⁶ Gareev, 244.

At 0400 on 5 June 1989, eight SCUD rocket warheads exploded on Mujahideen positions. This was followed by a heavy aviation and artillery preparation that eradicated the Mujahideen positions. The main attack was to the southwest and was led by the 15th Tank Brigade and the 37th Commando. The remaining regiments of the 11th Infantry Division joined the main attack and conducted the supporting attack in the south. By the end of the 5th of June, the 15th Tank brigade had advanced 10 kilometers. The Mujahideen defenses were overrun and the Mujahideen were in retreat.⁷ Mujahideen casualties were heavy and major Mujahideen commanders were killed or wounded. The Mujahideen were unable to convert from a loose confederation of insurgents to a conventional force and were defeated in conventional battle by a smaller force. It was a significant victory for the Afghan government.

A Failed *Coup de Etat*

Another big test of the armed forces came in March 1990 when Minister of Defense, General Shahnawaz Tanai joined forces with Mujahideen commander Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in an attempt to overthrow the government. The *coup de etat* failed and Tanai fled to Pakistan. The attempt cost 136 military and 180 civilian lives, 46 aircraft, 22 tanks, 12 personnel carriers and seven artillery pieces.⁸ One result of the failed coup was that it showed the Afghan government forces that they could effectively respond to crisis at some level.

Siege of Kabul

Kabul was always the major prize and the government had to hold on to it at all costs. Afghanistan, like the Soviet Union, had three uniformed armed forces—the forces of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior [similar to the *Carabinieri*], and Ministry of State Security [similar to KGB]. They all had separate chains of command and their efforts were coordinated only at the highest level. The Armed Forces of the Ministry of State Security were at full strength, were better paid, had the better conscripts, and were the largest force. They controlled the SCUD missiles. The Armed Forces of the Ministry of Defense were the largest force on paper, but actually the smallest force. All three armed forces had separate sectors in the defense of Kabul. They formed a 360 degree defense, although the Mujahideen concentrated their efforts on the northwest Paghman Valley approach as well as on the west, southwest, southeast, and north. The defense relied heavily on aviation and artillery. During 1989-1990, Afghan forces used 3,300 aviation bombs and 66,000 artillery rounds in the defense of Kabul. They lost 51 dead, seven tanks, 12 personnel carriers and six aircraft. Known Mujahideen losses were 400 dead, 29 ammunition dumps, 2,800 rockets and recoilless rifle rounds. Most of these Mujahideen losses were recorded during government counterattacks into the Paghman Valley.⁹ Kabul held until the last.

⁷ Gareev, 250.

⁸ Gareev, 129-149.

⁹ Gareev, 232-233.

The Siege of Khost

Holding Khost was always a problem for the Soviets. The Afghan 25th Division held the city and was supplied by air for most of the Soviet-Afghan War. During Operational Magistral, the Soviets reopened the road to Khost, but only temporarily.¹⁰ With the withdrawal of the Soviets, Khost was again a prime target. General Farukh commanded the 25th. He was a graduate of a Russian military school and spoke excellent Russian. Often he would broadcast his radio reports in Russian, knowing that it would slow down the Mujahideen intercept efforts. At the start of the siege, Farukh commanded some 4,000 personnel, 160 artillery pieces and mortars, 36 tanks (of which 26 were operable), and 20 personnel carriers. His division was at 18 percent of TO&E strength. The garrison was supported by SCUD and airstrikes and transport aviation. Feeding and supplying a remote garrison by air is a difficult, long-term proposition. Ammunition and food were often in short supply. Repairing military equipment became more difficult. Finally, in April 1991, the garrison surrendered to Jalaluddin Haqani.¹¹ The political need to hold Khost tied up forces and resources that the government could have used elsewhere.

LOC Security:

Keeping the roads open to the Soviet Union was a major accomplishment of the Afghan government forces. The forces involved in this were uniformed armed forces of the three uniformed ministries as well as the tribal militias. These militias often had former Mujahideen who had returned home after the Soviets left and were glad of the pay and work.

Throughout, the saving grace for the Afghan government was that the Mujahideen ranks also dwindled dramatically. The Mujahideen were not a cohesive structure. They could form and deploy insurgent groups against the Soviets. They disbanded after the Soviets left, not because they felt that the Soviet-built Afghan army was a match for them, but because their objective was no longer there. The Soviets that were left were not visible in the fighting after the withdrawal. The way the Soviet's provided their post-withdrawal assistance did not create an incentive for the insurgents to again take to the field. Once the Mujahideen got home, many of them joined the government tribal militia force and were paid to guard the lines of communication from the Soviet Union to the cities. Others went back to their Pakistani areas, but without a cohesive structure and with no large Soviet profile, they did not agitate to return.

The Soviet military assistance following their withdrawal was logistics and advisers. Soviet transport aircraft flew in everything from flour to SCUD missiles to keep the government intact. Weekly truck convoys brought in much more. There were reports of Soviet aircraft flying attack missions in Afghanistan, but most of these are based on reporters' observations that the pilots flying attack missions were "too good to be Afghan." There were reports of bombers

¹⁰ For a discussion of Operation Magistral, see Lester Grau, "The Battle for Hill 3234: Last Ditch Defense in the Mountains of Afghanistan" published in Journal of Slavic Military Studies, April-June 2011.

¹¹ Gareev, 252-260.

being placed on alert at Mary and Karshi Khanabad, but going on alert is one thing, dropping bombs is another.

Summary:

The Soviets (and post-Soviet Russians and Central Asians today) considered the Soviet effort a success in that the security environment in Afghanistan, including internal conflicts and power challenges, did not create cross-border instability in the Soviet Union and it checked the Islamic fundamentalism at the time. The key to this was pursuing the withdrawal with much more selective support and not presenting a Soviet profile that created a target for militancy and continued conflict. The Soviet effort was not successful in dealing with Pakistani tribal area militancy, addressing critical border and refugee issues, as well as other contributive problems such as economic stagnation and narcotics traffic.

The current situation for ISAF is different than it was for the Soviets—but the differences are mostly advantageous. For example, Pakistan is an ally to the effort to an important degree and it is not a belligerent in the conflict; there is more international attention, support, and stake in the outcome; the United States and others are not facing a domestic situation comparable to the conditions that led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Ultimately, the Soviet experience demonstrates that limited and achievable objectives which support Afghan security can be considered 'successful' while failure to engage Pakistan in a way that extends their writ of state and provision of security to control the tribal belt creates an 'enduring failure'.

Contributors: Tom Wilhelm and Les Grau